The consolidatiion of media has brought a marked decrease in the ability of local broadcasting to serve the public interest. This is not a matter of happenstance or anecdotal accounting. There are strong fudemental reasons why this is more likely than not to be the case.

The impact of business models

Under locally owned stations, management is inclined to provide broadcasting that has a focus on local community issues because local owners and local talent are part of the community and build their programming from their local experience. As such, local stations tend more to maintain their local, community oriented programming, even where it may be merely a selection of published recordings, and this goes a long way toward building a distinct sense of local community.

Natiional chains consolidate their message as a matter of practice. Their business model has them drastically reducing or eliminating local talent. The entire staffing and operations is toward having a unified, sanitized product that represents the lowest common denominator for their target market across the country. While local blurbs may be added to try to give a local flavor, it is artificial and in no way an effective substitute for the real thing.

Economic/financial incentives

Local stations have strong economic incentive to pursue a local focus for their programming, having less expensive, locally oriented material on hand and it being the basis of their operations. Conversely, there is a disincentive for local stations to rely entirely upon syndicated materials because they tend to add to their operating costs.

National chains, on the other hand, have every economic incentive to remove locally oriented programming. With their national focus, it is cheaper to create a single canned presentation that is sanitized of local flavor, then pump it everywhere. Where local flavor is stuck on is an afterthought, it adds an additional cost for the chain and tends to serve as a poor substitute for locally produced programming anyway.

So, local stations have an economic incentive for local programming in the form of the cost of buying syndicated programming, leading them to better serve their community, while national chains have an economic incentive to reduce their service to local communities because under its business model doing so adds a significant cost to their operations.

Logistical incentives

Local stations, having less material than is available nationally, are more likely to incur the additional cost for suppllementing their local programming with syndicated feeds. In contrast, with more available to create programming at the national level, the national chains are not logistically driven to incur additional cast and offer local programming out of a need for material.

These correlations between business model and the levels of local service provided result in the national chains being both financially and programatically inclined to reduce or eliminate locally oriented programming.

The dangers of consolidation vs fragmentation

The ability to control the message distributed to radio listeners and TV viewers is a power which when accumulated into one set of hands has a natural propensity for abuse.

Power seeks to perpetuate itself or else it soon ceases to exist. The primary method for self perpetuation is to exercise the power in hand to whatever extent may be possible and, whenever able, to expand and accumulate more power (the alternative to the latter being to share power which weakens one's position.) The most effective at exercising and accumulating power tend to rise to the top and the others tend to fall to the side -- it is the darwinian survival of the most ruthless. To survive thus means pushing the use of power to its limits. When such is the model, the abuse of power is not merely a propensity, it is a certainty.

Case example

Sinclair Broadcasting's having built a power base of numerous stations across the nation has decided to force their stations to air an anti-Kerry documentary days before the election. Clearly, Sinclair uses the public airwaves free of charge and is obligated by law to serve the public interest.

Nonetheless, Sinclair is willing to risk of violating federal election and communications laws because organizations which operate in a power based mode tend to conclude that the ends justify the means. This is not unique to Sinclair. When the FCC's basis of decision making places monitary concerns and the potential for profits first, the organizations under its control place their power and profits above that public interest.

Conclusion

The standard of decision making must be to preserve the wellbeing of the society in the operation of the broadcast media upon the public airwaves. This means not allowing anybody to wield untold power to influence the outcome of our election process. It also means not allowing anybody to dominate control of the media across our society to distort or prevent legitiment discourse on public issues.

Sinclair's actions show why we need to strengthen media ownership rules, not weaken them. The FCC must hold licensees accountable to the communities in which they broadcast and put the onus upon the licensee to demonstrate that they have clearly been broadcasting for the community benefit.